

What is claimed is:

1. A method operable on a computer for selecting and packaging items for mailing, comprising the steps of:

receiving a customer order specifying a plurality of items for shipping by mail;

5 retrieving a selected characteristic for each of the plurality of items;

determining, based on the selected characteristic, if a single package containing the plurality of items will exceed a desired postal rate;

if the single package will not exceed the desired postal rate, packaging the plurality of items in a single package;

10 if the single package will exceed the desired postal rate,

dividing, based on the selected characteristic, the customer order into multiple sub-orders, each sub-order including a subset of the plurality of items selected so that the sub-order will be at the desired postal rate,

printing a mailer including a control indicia on the mailer,

15 automatically selecting, based on the control indicia, items for inclusion in each sub-order, and

packaging each of the sub-orders individually so that the customer order comprises multiple packages; and

mailing the single or multiple packages to the customer.

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2. A method in accordance with claim 1 wherein the customer order is received by mail on a pre-printed form.

3. A method in accordance with claim 1 wherein the selected characteristic is chosen
25 from the group comprising: item weight, item thickness and item size.

4. A method in accordance with claim 1 wherein the step of packaging each of the sub-orders comprises the steps of:

printing a mailer for each sub-order;

30 placing each mailer on an assembly line; and

placing each item in each sub-order on the associated mailer as the mailer traverses the assembly line.

5. A method in accordance with claim 4 wherein:
5 each mailer comprises a printed paper mailer;
each paper mailer includes, on a first side, a bar code indicative of the items to be packaged with the mailer and on a second side a customer address.
6. A method in accordance with claim 5 wherein the assembly line comprises:
10 a scanner for reading the bar code on each mailer;
a plurality of hoppers, each hopper containing a plurality of like items; and
a mechanism responsive to computer control for moving an item from a hopper onto a mailer.
- 15 7. A method in accordance with claim 6 and further including a customer message on the front of a mailer readable by a customer and indicating that a customer order has been fulfilled in multiple packages.
8. A method in accordance with claim 7 wherein the step of packaging each of the
20 sub-orders includes shrink-wrapping each of the sub-orders in a plastic wrap so that the customer address and customer message are readable through the plastic wrap.
9. A method in accordance with claim 1 wherein the step of receiving a customer order is performed at a location geographically remote from the step of packaging each of
25 the sub-orders.
10. A system for selecting and packaging items for mailing, comprising:
a processor;
a memory connected to the processor, the memory storing data and instructions
30 for controlling the operation of the processor;
the processor operative to perform the steps of

receiving a customer order specifying a plurality of items for shipping by mail;
retrieving, from the memory, a selected characteristic for each of the plurality of
items;

determining, based on the selected characteristic, if a single package containing
5 the plurality of items will exceed a desired postal rate;

if the single package will not exceed the desired postal rate, packaging the items
in a single package;

if the single package will exceed the desired postal rate,
dividing, based on the selected characteristic, the customer order into
10 multiple sub-orders, each sub-order including a subset of the plurality of items
selected so that the sub-order will be at the desired postal rate,
printing a mailer including a control indicia on the mailer,
automatically selecting, based on the control indicia, items for inclusion in
each sub-order, and
15 packaging each of the sub-orders individually so that the customer order
comprises multiple packages; and
mailing the single or multiple packages to the customer.

11. A system in accordance with claim 10 wherein the customer order is received by
20 mail on a pre-printed form.

12. A system in accordance with claim 10 wherein the selected characteristic is
chosen from the group comprising: item weight, item thickness and item size.

25 13. A system in accordance with claim 10 further including an assembly line and
wherein the step of packaging each of the sub-orders comprises the steps of:
printing a mailer for each sub-order;
placing each mailer on the assembly line; and
placing each item in each sub-order on the associated mailer as the mailer
30 traverses the assembly line.

14. A system in accordance with claim 13 wherein:
each mailer comprises a printed paper mailer;
each paper mailer includes, on a first side, a bar code indicative of the items to be
packaged with the mailer and on a second side a customer address.

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15. A system in accordance with claim 14 wherein the assembly line comprises:
a scanner for reading the bar code on each mailer;
a plurality of hoppers, each hopper containing a plurality of like items; and
a mechanism responsive to computer control for moving an item from a hopper
10 onto a mailer.

16. A system in accordance with claim 15 and further including a customer message
on the front of a mailer readable by a customer and indicating that a customer order has
been fulfilled in multiple packages.

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17. A system in accordance with claim 16 wherein the step of packaging each of the
sub-orders includes shrink-wrapping each of the sub-orders in a plastic wrap so that the
customer address and customer message are readable through the plastic wrap.

20 18. A system in accordance with claim 10 wherein the step of receiving a customer
order is performed at a location geographically remote from the step of packaging each of
the sub-orders.

25 19. A method for selecting and packaging items for mailing, comprising the steps of:
receiving a customer order specifying a plurality of items for shipping by mail;
retrieving a selected characteristic for each of the plurality of items;
determining, based on the selected characteristic, if a single package containing
the plurality of items will exceed a desired postal rate;
if the single package will not exceed the desired postal rate, packaging the items
30 in a single package;
if the single package will exceed the desired postal rate,

dividing, based on the selected characteristic, the customer order into multiple sub-orders, each sub-order including a subset of the plurality of items selected so that the sub-order will be at the desired postal rate,
printing a mailer including a control indicia on the mailer,
5 automatically selecting, based on the control indicia, items for inclusion in each sub-order, and
packaging each of the sub-orders individually so that the customer order comprises multiple packages; and
mailing the single or multiple packages to the customer.

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20. A system for selecting and packaging items for mailing, comprising:
means for receiving a customer order specifying a plurality of items for shipping by mail;
means for retrieving a selected characteristic for each of the plurality of items;
15 means for determining, based on the selected characteristic, if a single package containing the plurality of items will exceed a desired postal rate;
means for, if the single package will not exceed the desired postal rate, packaging the items in a single package;
means for, if the single package will exceed the desired postal rate,
20 dividing, based on the selected characteristic, the customer order into multiple sub-orders, each sub-order including a subset of the plurality of items selected so that the sub-order will be at the desired postal rate,
printing a mailer including a control indicia on the mailer,
automatically selecting, based on the control indicia, items for inclusion in
25 each sub-order, and
packaging each of the sub-orders individually so that the customer order comprises multiple packages; and
means for mailing the single or multiple packages to the customer.

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30 21. A method operable on a computer for selecting and packaging items for mailing, comprising the steps of:

receiving a customer order specifying a plurality of items for shipping by mail;
determining, based on a selected characteristic for each of the plurality of items, if
a single package containing the plurality of items will exceed a desired postal rate;
if the single package will not exceed the desired postal rate, packaging the
5 plurality of items in a single package;
if the single package will exceed the desired postal rate,
dividing, based on the selected characteristic, the customer order into
multiple sub-orders, each sub-order including a subset of the plurality of items
selected so that the sub-order will be at the desired postal rate,
10 packaging each of the sub-orders individually so that the customer order
comprises multiple packages; and
mailing the single or multiple packages to the customer.

22. A method operable on a computer for selecting and packaging items for mailing,
15 comprising the steps of:
receiving a customer order specifying a plurality of items for shipping by mail;
determining, based on a selected characteristic or each of the plurality of items, if
a single package containing the plurality of items will exceed a desired postal rate;
if the single package will not exceed the desired postal rate, printing a single
20 mailer including a control indicia for operating a machine to place the plurality of items
into a single package;
if the single package will exceed the desired postal rate, printing a plurality of
mailers, each of the plurality of mailers including a control indicia for operating a
machine to place a selected subset of the plurality of items into a package, the multiple
25 packages associated with the plurality of mailers together fulfilling the customer order.